

The Curriculum of Necessity or What Must an Educated Person Know?

missionislam.com

By John Taylor Gatto

A few years back one of the schools at Harvard, perhaps the School of Government, issued some advice to its students on planning a career in the new international economy it believed was arriving. It warned sharply that academic classes and professional credentials would count for less and less when measured against real world training. Ten qualities were offered as essential to successfully adapting to the rapidly changing world of work. See how many of those you think are regularly taught in the schools of your city or state:

- 1) The ability to define problems **without a guide.**
- 2) The ability to ask hard questions which challenge prevailing assumptions.
- 3) The ability to work in teams **without guidance.**
- 4) The ability to work absolutely alone.
- 5) The ability to persuade others that your course is the right one.
- 6) The ability to discuss issues and techniques in public with an eye to reaching decisions about policy.
- 7) The ability to conceptualize and reorganize information into new patterns.
- 8) The ability to pull what you need quickly from masses of irrelevant data.
- 9) The ability to think inductively, deductively, and dialectically.
- 10) The ability to attack problems heuristically.

You might be able to come up with a better list than Harvard did without surrendering any of these fundamental ideas, and yet from where I sit, and I sat around schools for nearly 30 years, I don't think we teach any of these things as a matter of school policy.

And for good reason, schools as we know them couldn't function at all if we did. Can you imagine a school where children challenged prevailing assumptions? Or worked alone without guidance? Or defined their own problems? It would be a radical contradiction of everything we've been conditioned to expect schools to do. If you want your son or daughter to learn what Harvard said was necessary, you'll have to arrange it outside of school time, maybe in between the dentist and the dancing lessons. And if you are poor, you better forget it altogether.

But suppose a miracle happened, and we all agreed to change schools so they would allow these learnings to occur? It would provoke an economic catastrophe because the dollar cost of teaching these things the way they need to be taught would be considerably less than we are currently spending. We would have to displace many unnecessary occupational titles like "reading specialist," "bilingual coordinator," "assistant principal," et al., end the curious rituals of standardized testing, and sharply reduce the lucrative school-contracts game. We would also have to rely so heavily on the personnel, materials, and expertise of the everyday world--as opposed to the cloistered world of certified schoolteachers--that over a million schoolteachers would find themselves out of work.

Remember the injunctions "without a guide," "without guidance," "absolutely alone?" You don't expect kids to be able to do that without practice, do you? Right now school uses up most of the available practice time in surveillance, ranking, and close-order drill. Giving kids responsibility, privacy, and time alone demands less teaching, not more. That's simple arithmetic. But right under our noses for every year of the 20th century, forced schooling became bigger and bigger business--until at some point it became the biggest business of them all, dominating small towns and small cities and taking a seat at the same table with

bankers and manufacturers in state legislatures. Somewhere, when we weren't looking, megalithic institutional schooling became an irrational cornerstone of our entire economy and by the time we began to notice, it couldn't be budged no matter how strenuously we grunted and groaned.

But back to Harvard or whoever produced that curriculum of necessity I opened this with. None of the schools I ever worked for were able to provide any important parts of this vital curriculum for children. All the schools I worked for taught nonsense up front. And under the table, they taught young people how to be dumb, how to be slavish, how to be frightened, and how to be dependent.

There is too much money locked up in teaching this way for the school establishment and its invisible outriggers in the teacher-college business, the publishing business, the testing business, the school bus business, the construction industry, the bologna and peanut butter supply industry, and on and on, together with their political friends in state legislatures to ever surrender the monopoly structure of government schools easily. And, of course, there's more than money at stake. The power to shape human thought is another serious intoxicant.

Because of the business aspect of schooling, we've been compelled to lead our children far astray from the simple, well-trodden paths to an education, and into an increasingly fantastic land of machines, weird psychologies, armies of pseudo-specialized personnel, fake experts and false managers we find in government schools from coast to coast. Some of the people who have done this misleading were ideologues, but most were just everyday folks like you and me trying to get through the day. They don't want to hurt children, they just don't see any other way to make a living.

It took me about a decade of schoolteaching to realize that schooling and education are concepts at war with each other. The lessons that every public school I've seen in the past 30 years teach have very little to do with reading, writing, and arithmetic. That's our cover story, but it's easy to penetrate; any good teacher will tell you if they trust you that such considerations are on the periphery of concern in schooling. Depending upon the individual teacher's political perspective, schools are, from the right wing, a necessary way to avoid social chaos and target winners, or from the left wing, a way to adjust children to fit a particular social hierarchy controlled by the upper classes, and hopefully a means to control children's minds to accept a different, more liberal hierarchy. In either case, when looked at politically, schools are a means of behavioral, attitudinal indoctrination, places in which the development of the mind is only a rhetorical genuflection.

And yet in the dreams of large segments of what we refer to as the "general public," mental development is what schools are principally about and that is true, I think, for all parents. A good teacher is someone who does a good job developing the human intellect. This poses an unsolvable paradox for teachers who succeed in meeting parental expectations because being a good teacher that way is a very bad way to get ahead in pedagogy. Principals, superintendents, coordinators, teacher college professors are not drawn from the pool of good teachers. Am I telling you something you really don't know? It's worth thinking hard about why that has to be true in a system which is compelled to spend vast amounts of money on a regular basis, in a system based on social control and competition, and in a system with aspirations, however latent, to achieve utopia. In none of these cases which describe the commonality of American schooling is a good teacher much more than a danger. This explains why schoolteachers like Jaime Escalante and Marva Collins were driven from their schools in spite of such favorable attention from national media. They didn't understand what was expected of them--or they rebelled.

Schools as we have arranged them are bad places for children to grow up. I include the schools generally thought of as "good" in that indictment, and I would suggest to you this is sufficient explanation why two-thirds of a million families nationwide have taken their children back from public authorities and are educating them at home. That number will surely double in the next five years unless restrictive legislation

stops it. Kids educated at home are brighter and more impressively human than institutionalized kids simply because they are allowed to learn free of bells, bogus experts, phony sequences, endless interventions and similar junk. The pedagogy they are exposed to is real because it is rooted in the tradition of the past as represented by parents; the pedagogy of schoolteachers is that of state-appointed witch doctors, drawn from vain, bizarre and arrogant theories of human development based on human whim. It is not for nothing teacher colleges are reviled.

If journalists did regular comparisons between home and government variety teaching, forced government schooling would gradually be exposed for the unnatural growth on its host society that it really is, a kind of tumor which over the 20th century has become malignant. But as I said earlier, most school people are just like you and me, they don't really understand the complex nature of what it is they are doing; they just operate a few levers in a social machine which has ingested them. At the end of the day they are tired, angry at what they consider unfair criticism, discouraged by the attitude of children.

Yet the school institution is structured in such a way--through a brilliant series of checks and balances--that the living of a schoolteacher who follows orders can only be achieved at the expense of children's minds and characters. Some teachers sabotage the system, I know I did so to a criminal degree, but most do not. Remember, teachers and principals and superintendents did not make it the way it is. Nor do they have any legal power to change the worst aspects of it, any more than parents and school board do. It is as I said, a political thing. The mechanism itself is a work of genius, far beyond the reach of little people except those willing to sabotage it, and of course the great army of home-educators assembling steadily and silently which will ultimately destroy it if not driven from the field.

Schools create most of the problems they ask for money to solve. In my long teaching experience, poor children are almost as easy to work with as prosperous children if you go about it the right way. The first part of the right way is an underlying assumption schools cannot allow--that all children want to learn how to be their best selves. They don't need to be forced. You begin by saying the poor are just like the rich except they have less money. For historical reasons not so complex you can't figure them out for yourself if you try forced schools in this century have not been allowed to operate as if this obvious truth is true. An army of specialists inside schools and out is fed by giving advice to and about the poor. In the irrational economy we have evolved with the help of forced schooling many of us could not live without a widespread belief that the poor are different--and dangerous.

I didn't learn what I just told you theologically, philosophically or academically, I learned it by actually teaching poor children well enough to be named New York State Teacher of the Year once and New York City Teacher of the Year several times. If the screening panels had known what my actual assumptions and methods were, they would certainly not have selected me but they made some incorrect assumptions of their own without my help, not realizing that it was my relentless sabotage of their system which produced the good results my kids displayed.

I did have some difficulty, of course, actually a great deal of difficulty; but only an inconsequential part of it came from the poor children themselves. The lion's share came from senior teachers whose boat I was rocking, from superintendents, ideological school board members (not all, but some), principals, assistant principals, coordinators, guidance counselors, drug counselors, after school counselors, testing authorities, state department of education personnel, city department of education personnel, teacher college personnel, etc.

As my kids began to achieve success assigned to other kids in higher classes, they were met not with cheers on the part of school authorities but with anger and derision, a violent reaction which generalized to other teachers badgered by their classes for the same opportunities I was arranging for their friends. If you reflect a little on that dynamic alone you will discover--without any expert help--why teachers themselves,

when schooled, are compelled to respond as medieval craft guild members did, with anger and sanctions, when confronted with a guild member who did better work than the average. It could not be allowed and it was not allowed; so it is with schoolteachers. Now you are better equipped to understand the heave-ho Jaime Escalante got.

So my principal, my superintendent, my school board, and my senior colleagues did not appreciate what my kids were doing, which was essentially teaching themselves. Teaching kids to teach themselves, a principle which constituted 75% of my success and which has been practiced by good parents all through history, is such a monumental threat to the school empire on all its level that many safeguards have been set up to see that it does not happen. These safeguards work automatically, through attendance laws, prepared curricula, fixed sequences, etc., so they require almost no human attention.

I've spent a number of years thinking hard about this thing; I've written a couple of books about it and hope to write a few more until I've said all I have to say, but the best service I can render you right now is to lay out a blueprint of the invisible curriculum schools teach. It is this curriculum, expensively maintained by rivers of tax money, that make schools in my opinion the single greatest problem in modern American life.

The first lesson schools teach is confusion. Because they have too many people, too many cells in a far too constrained space, and too much money which must be spent and then justified, schools teach too much. They can allow no time for learning. And notice, if you've been following my argument closely from the beginning, that that is true for the political leftist controlled schools, for the political rightist controlled schools, and for those schools, the overwhelming majority, controlled by the politically indifferent, those pragmatic technicians whose names we find hard to remember.

Schools allow no time for learning, only for memorization. Virtually nothing selected by schools as basic really is basic, virtually none of the school sequences is logically defensible. Schools teach the unrelating of everything. Take mathematics: a very great mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead, said in *The Aims of Education* that the way we teach math is disconnected and bewildering; you can't learn math this way he said in some elegant language.

His book will be in over half the libraries in the U.S., so pick it up, then ask yourself why your superintendent, your principal, or your kid's math teacher doesn't know what a great mathematician said a long time ago. Or if they do know, try to figure out the implications of not acting on such knowledge.

Schools teach confusion. Disconnected facts are not the way to a sane young mind but just the opposite.

Another thing that schools teach well is class position. Schools teach that children are put into a class and must stay in the class to which they are assigned except in the unlikely event that someone important lets them out. This is an Egyptian view of life which strongly contradicts the genius of this nation's historical myths, and even a significant part of its pre-20th century reality. Grouping children by age, by social class, or standardized reading scores is an inherently vicious practice, and a stupid one besides if your aim is to develop the intellect. It serves a private philosophical agenda which would be far from the general public will, I think, were it better understood.

Still another thing that schools teach is the meaninglessness of everything except external reward and punishment. By bells and many other similar techniques they teach that nothing is worth finishing. The gross error of this is progressive: if nothing is worth finishing then by extension nothing is worth starting either. Few children are so thick-skulled, they miss the point.

School is a liar's world where people like myself are constantly making a fuss about the importance of learning while our actions and the environment itself says something different. How many thousands of

times do you think this has to happen to your own son or daughter before they are trained indelibly in the truth? No wonder children give up. Poor children just give up sooner.

The lessons continue. A big one is emotional dependency and this is achieved as an animal trainer works, by kicks and caresses. With the whip or the perfumed hand, we condition children to subordinate their own learning patterns--those sequences unique to every man or woman born--to the arbitrary whim of some servant of the state. Think of your fingerprint. Suppose you had to submit its whorls and ridges to surgical alteration in order to meet some state standard of a politically correct fingerprint. Ridiculous, right? Then why not equally ridiculous that some stranger tells your kid what to think, when to think, how long to think, what to find important in the thoughts, etc.? I tell you as a teacher the mutilation from this procedure is long lasting and in most cases, permanent.

We teach that human dignity, even in matters as basic as urination and the movement of one's bowels, is at the disposal of others. Do you really believe your child is not damaged by this pornographic form of socialization? Many have remarked how degraded and dishonest children have become in the modern era, but have failed to locate the cause in the daily training the state has arranged for them. The degradation comes from habit, the dishonesty from desperate attempts to preserve a unique self. School is the laboratory where these cultures are incubated best and longest.

Next is intellectual dependency. Waiting for a random stranger appointed by the state to dictate the contents of your mind, frequently evaluating the storage and retrieval of those contents, and training reflexive responses to the merit of those contents could not fit into anybody's definition of how the mind and the intellect gain power. If you cannot yourself imagine any other way to "learn," you might want to pick up Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography, or Watson and Crick's book, The Double Helix, in which you will be surprised to learn that DNA was discovered while playing games. Another magnificent surprise is in store for the readers of a book published by Harvard called Discovering. The author is a world class physicist named Robert Scott Root-Bernstein and what he has to say about how science is actually practiced will curl the hair of science curriculum managers.

School as we have arranged it bends minds to fit prearranged patterns. After schooling the mind of a child will find difficulty initiating anything, it will be incomplete. This is perhaps a good way to treat people you don't like much, but it is the worst possible way to treat free citizens.

Perhaps the most important lesson schools teach is the lesson of alienation, self-dislike, fear, envy, that sort of thing. From about 1890 to 1930, the period when the cult of so-called scientific management took hold and the towering edifice of school administration was built, school advocates would proudly proclaim "alienation" to be one of the great social benefits of schooling. Now they are quieter about it or perhaps have even forgotten, but it is even a more pernicious by-product today of the way we school because schooling has amputated most of the other ways which once existed to grow up.

A strong self-image comes from four reliable sources: a strong family, a strong culture, a strong religion, and a strong work tradition; you need only hang around school people for a long time as I have to realize how very unwelcome parents are in schools, and culture, religion, and hard work are not quite, but almost, equally anathema. This is because the actual work and traditions of a community are considered dangerous competition to the order and discipline of abstract schooling--which indeed they are.

Several powerful 19th century philosophers, in particular the Prussian Hegel and the Frenchman Comte who wrote at exactly the moment when school thing was coming together, explained the value of the mechanism of isolation in schooling. You will recall that the French philosopher Rousseau in his classic text proving Locke's contention that children were blank tablets, a book called Emile, found it essential to isolate Emile from family, friends, and other influences in order to efficiently manipulate his mind. That was

written around 1790, just after the American revolution. Only a few decades later Comte and Hegel, both extremely influential in the development of the institution of state schooling, saw clearly that Rousseau was right. Any private source of power or meaning inside a child's spirit would be an obstacle to the total control of life by the State--a goal of both men and of the growing strong state crowd in Europe and the United States.

By breaking the power of the tidewater South, the Anglo-Norman (or Puritan) North overwhelmed the Anglo-Saxon impulse toward family-centered lives and replaced it with a drive toward institution-centered lives. Thus were both Hegel and Comte turned loose in our land without any substantial opposition. Comte's "positive" philosophy became the gospel of industry and science and Hegel's social dialectic which saw the State as God's literal manifestation on earth became the gospel of our new form of schooling. It was not by accident that the leading Hegelian scholar in the Western hemisphere became the national superintendent of schooling for 16 years. Hegel and Comte taught that schooling to operate successfully must wrench children free from any private source of strength--family, culture, religion, work, neighborhoods; schooling should teach children not to trust themselves, but to trust in government-appointed strangers. Every single Horatio Alger book taught exactly the same thing, all 108 of them.

In the early 20th century the great American efficiency engineer Frederick Taylor taught the same lessons indirectly, as roads to a better bottom line. His words were heeded by the new and growing class of school managers, brought into being by Taylor and his underwriters, a class which had never existed before in human history. School management and school theorists in the equally new colleges for teachers were compelled to pretend that children are blank tablets to be written upon, or else the business could not have grown. That is still true. It is better business to pretend that children are blank tablets to be written upon than to acknowledge the obvious truth that they are not.

As a result of the lessons our schools teach, we turn loose incomplete and undeveloped young men and women, people who subsequently grow older but are unable to grow into adults no matter how old they get. Modern education has renounced, said Walter Lippman, the idea that the pupil must learn to understand himself, his fellow men, and the world in which he is to live; the teacher has no subject matter that even pretends to deal with the universal issues of human destiny; modern education rejects and excludes from its curriculum of necessity the whole religious tradition of the West; it abandons and neglects the whole classical heritage of the great works of great individuals; modern education is based on a denial that it is necessary to transmit from generation to generation the religious and classical culture of the Western world.

The notion that every problem can be studied with an empty mind, without preconception, without knowing what has already been learned about it must condemn children to chronic childishness. The uprooted and incoherent curriculum of modern schooling produces children who are, at best, indifferent to the dishonest adult world around them, and at worst are angry children who hurt us, hurt each other, and hurt themselves. School is like a hospital where you go to get hurt. Crime, drugs, and even worse forms of immorality are a fact of life in schools far from the ghetto--this is the vaunted socialization that institutional schooling inevitably delivers, which no "reform" can reach and which has sent an army of parents into the school rooms to take their children home.

We continue to grow crops of children who have trouble connecting the present to the future and trouble connecting the past to the present. Year after year we turn out a mass of the young, morally numb, who have had the meaning taken out of their growing up time. This is the fruit of allowing government workers to decide what life should mean, our harvest from replacing mothers and fathers and ministers and other community leaders with government appointees arbitrarily placed in charge of the children of America.

Have you noticed that a frightening percentage of our school children have a taste for cruelty? What would you expect the retaliation to be from being sentenced to an ugly chair in an ugly room in an ugly crackerbox building for 12 years with bells ringing in your ears and crazy people shrieking at you? Have we lost our minds that we can't see a connection?

And we produce children who are obsessively materialistic, doomed to a lifetime of wanting what no economy could conceivably supply; perpetually dissatisfied, whining, envious, self-hating. We demand that our honored graduates be passive, obedient, grateful for a handout, fearful of real work. Most of all we demand they acknowledge they cannot solve problems by themselves, but must wait for a teacher, a social worker, a TV set, a computer program, or a government official to tell them what to do.

The game that government schools engage in has little to do with teaching children to read. The very act of schooling millions of children as if they were one large mass of fish is the most radical act, it seems to me, in human history. The reason we do it this way has nothing to do with what children need, nothing to do with what families need, and nothing any longer, even, with what industry and commerce really needs. The only entity which requires people to be dumbed down into a tractable mass is big government.

Right now we are engaged in a colossal self-deception; school is not a way to "learn" anything valuable which a free people would freely choose to learn. It is a jobs project, plain and simple (or perhaps not so plain, although it needs to be), that is the reason why every school reform effort so far has turned into an enlargement of the very economic aspects which make schooling a contradiction to the idea of education.

The worst part of schooling is inherent in its nature as a business, we are compelled to overbuy overadministrate, and overteach because schools function as the largest single component of the American economy demands it. In doing this, we remove the situations and the incentives through which most learning takes place. And yet, there is no way to hide from the irony which will not go away: to change the way we do the school thing so our children have a chance at an education will provoke an economic catastrophe our government-managed planed economy has no way of handling. There is no place to put the people displaced if we deconstructed schooling as a business; at least there is no easy answer to that embarrassing question.

Our type of schooling obscures the real issues an education is about, issues caught in the great timeless questions like "Who am I?" and "Does life have any greater meaning?" We have gotten rid of the old curriculum because we are afraid to face the issues it raises about man's place in the universe and his destiny. Walter Lippman, who I quoted earlier in this essay, said more than 50 years ago that the prevailing education was destined, if it continued, to destroy Western civilization; he said if the results are bad, and they indubitably are, on what ground could any of us disclaim our responsibility to undertake a profound re-examination of it?

Our type of schooling makes an education impossible and without an education young people go insane, or just give up. Confining a child with random strangers unknown to the family for almost every day of his natural youth, denying him any rudimentary privacy, confining him in a class structure like a nightmare of Karl Marx, conditioning him to bell/buzzer responses at short intervals like a daydream of Pavlov's--all these things are bizarre perversions of nature. They destroy the ability to think independently, to value quality, to concentrate, and even, I think, to love each other.

We have institutionalized the division of social classes in our school classes, and we have used the police power of the state to create a virtual caste system, complete with millions and millions of untouchables.

The crisis in the general community is begun and nurtured by the school structures we maintain. The massive dependency we force on children from the first grade onwards leads to the aimless quality of our

culture, indeed an increasingly large part of the culture is a mirror of the schoolroom where millions of children sit restlessly, unable to fill their own hours, unable to initiate lines of meaning in their own existence. The passive spirit imposed by television is only the illegitimate alter ego of a passive spirit imposed by the classroom.

There are many fine, tested, wonderful and inexpensive ways to inspire children to provide a first-class education for themselves, we all know a few of them. But whether it's going to be possible to get an education in the new schools of the year 2000 will depend on political decisions made by those who hold power in trust for all of us. Or perhaps I am wrong. Perhaps it will depend on defiant personal decisions of simple people, like the quiet revolution of the homeschoolers taking place under our noses right now which may be the most exciting social movement since the pioneers, not least because it is leaderless; a revolution in which our type of factory schooling has been treated as irrelevant, which it most certainly is. Starting as a skeptic, I have been visiting home schools all over the country for the past two years; starting as a skeptic, I came away feeling like Ezekiel when he saw the wheel. But I'll save that speech for another time.

Give me a minute to be a visionary. If we closed the government schools, divided half the tax money currently spent on these places among the parents with kids to educate and spent the other half on free libraries, on underwriting apprenticeships for every young person, and on subsidizing any group who wanted to open a school to do so we would get a pleasant intellectual surprise, I think. If we further provided a continuous public dialogue on the local level, limited political terms strictly in order to weaken the protective legislative net around businesses which profit from mass schooling, and launched a national crash program in family revival, we would find the American school nightmare changing in a dream we could all be proud of.

That isn't going to happen, I know.

The next best thing, then, is to deconstruct schooling--minimizing the "school" aspect and maximizing the education one. What that means in simple terms is trusting children, parents, families, communities--reversing the teacher/student equation so that the toxic professionalization which sees teaching, wrongheadedly, as the key to learning can be relegated to the Prussian drawing-boards from whence it sprang. Socrates, in the Apology, told us that if we professionalized teaching two bad results would occur: first, things that are easy to learn would be made to appear difficult, and second, things that are learned quickly would be prolonged indefinitely by breaking them down into their component parts and teaching each part separately.

Is there anyone who thinks who does not recognize that this is what we have caused to happen?

Even the simpler goal of deconstructing institutional schooling will require courage to challenge deeply rooted assumptions, and a great amount of stamina for a long struggle because the school monster will fight for its life.

Now let me give you some practical suggestions drawn from a lifetime teaching and thinking about schools. I've arranged them in no particular order. Even invoking a few of these safeguards will radically affect a school or district for the better:

- 1) Make everybody teach. There should be no such thing as a non-teaching principal, or assistant principal, coordinator, specialist, or any other category of school employee who doesn't actually spend time in face to face interaction with kids. The top-down administrative model hardly existed before 1900, it is a by-product of the cult of so-called scientific management which infected American life in the first three decades of the 20th century. It is a form of robbery against the taxpayers. Even if it were cost-free, it is based on ignorance of how education gets done--or indifference to it. Top-down management demoralizes

teachers, discourages parents from active participation in schools and confuses students. Get rid of it.

2) Let no school exceed a few hundred in size. Time to shut the factory schools forever; they are hideously expensive to maintain, degrade the children they encompass and the neighborhoods in which they stand; they present markets for every kind of commercial exploitation which would be badly hurt if schools were miniaturized.

Make schools small. Everyone knows that is the right way, you don't need an expert to tell you, but not everyone knows that it is the inexpensive way, too. And make these small schools local, curtail busing; neighborhoods need their own children and children need their own neighborhoods to feel real and to develop responsibility. My long experience with slum kids tells me that even in poor areas neighborhood resources are quite reach in the things which educate. These would be available to a neighborhood school but never accessible to a school factory.

And let us save ourselves a fortune although the construction industry will scream bloody murder, let us recognize there is no proper shape or place for a school building--schools can be everywhere and anywhere. In a short time desktop computers will allow libraries of tools to be everywhere, too.

3) Shut down "district" school boards and sharply constrict the power and size of state and large-city centralized school boards; they are a paradise for grifters and grafters and even if they weren't their long-range interventions are irrelevant at best and horribly damaging at worst, as well as being ruinously expensive.

Trust students, parents and localities to want the best for themselves and to have the ability to learn how to get it. That was the American genius for the first 250 years of our history, and we are still coasting on the energy that engine of self-direction built up. Our period of state socialism, from just before the First World War until now was a necessary experiment, perhaps, but it has not been a good one in any human sense. The institutions state socialism engenders must necessarily suffocate human beings in order to realize the power of the state.

If you ask, "To what human end?" as I do, the answer is locked in two words, "security" and "control." Yet the loss of human freedom is too large a price to pay for either or both because it bleeds away our reason for being alive in the first place.

Decentralize school down to the neighborhood level; in that one bold move families would be given control over the professionals in their children's lives. Each school under this guidance would have its own citizen managing board elected from among neighbors.

School corruption, like the national milk price rigging scandal which affected schools for most of this century until very recently, would be radically downsized when the temptations inherent in remote authority which controls bulk-purchasing are ended.

4) Measure accomplishment by performance, most often performance against a personal standard. Standardized tests don't work, they correlate with nothing of human value, their very existence perverts curriculum into an advance preparation for the extravagant ritual administration of the tests. Why are we doing this? Before you reply, "How should I know?" I would ask you to use your common sense. Would you hire a newspaper reporter on the basis of his tests scores in journalism school? Would you hire a hair stylist with a straight "A" average from a beauty school? The fact is that nobody is crazy enough to hire anyone on the basis of grades and test scores except...for government work. Tests are useless as predictors unless the competition is rigged in advance by only allowing people who score well on tests to have the job. That is the sorry story of the government licensing racket in this century.

Performance testing is where genuine evaluation will always be found. Close down the testing empire.

5) End the teacher certification monopoly which is only kept alive by illicit agreements between state legislatures and teacher colleges. It makes colleges happy, it supports an army of unnecessary occupational titles, and it deprives children--and competent adults--of valuable connections with each other.

The licensing monopoly is richly deserving of all the disgust we can pour on it. The legendary private schools of this nation would not dream of restricting themselves to certified teachers. Let anyone who can demonstrate performance competency before a citizen board, a school faculty, a parent body, or a group of returning clientele, then be licensed to teach, if indeed there is any need at all to have a teaching license.

6) Restore the primary experience base we have stolen from kids' lives. Kids need to do, not sit in chairs. The school diet of confinement, test worship, bell addiction, and dependence on low grade secondary experience in the form of semi-literate printed material cracks children away from their own innate understanding of how to learn and why. Let children engage in real tasks, not synthetic games and simulations. Field curriculum, critical thinking, apprenticeships, team projects, independent study, and other themes of primary experience must be restored to the life of the young.

7) Install permanent parent and community facilities in every school--in a prominent place. We need to create a tidal movement of real life in and out of the dead waters of school. Open these places on a daily basis to family and other community resource people and rig these rooms with appropriate equipment to allow parent partnerships with their own kids and even other kids on a voluntary basis. Frequently release kids from "class" to work with parents; frequently substitute parents and other adults for professional staff in classrooms, too.

8) Understand that total schooling is psychologically and procedurally unsound. Give children some private time and private space, some choice of subjects, methods, and even of the company they keep. If that sounds like a college, it is meant to. Human beings, including children, need freedom from constant surveillance and tabulation. Keep from numbering, ranking, and labeling kids so the human being can't be seen under the weight of the numbers. This is a stupid and cynical use of authority. Stop it.

9) Teach children to think critically so they can challenge the hidden assumptions of the world around them, including the assumptions of the school world. This type of thinking power has always been at the center of the world's elite educational systems. Policy makers are taught to think, the rest of the mass is not, or is taught partially. We could end such a means of social control in several short generations.

Now tell the truth, don't you wish this could happen for your own children? Don't you wish it had happened for you? Well, it can if we abandon our puritanical fear of what might occur if it happened for everyone. What that might be I have no more idea than you do, but of one thing I am certain: it would provoke a genuine age of enlightenment in human history such as the one just barely begun by the average American citizen before the dead hand of state schooling closed the door on it.

Children who can think critically and have some privacy can generate much of their own curriculum and self-monitor, too. That is the record Ben Franklin set down so eloquently in his famous Autobiography. Time to make that required reading again.

10) And finally, we must provide legitimate choices in education to parents and children: schooling can be performed under compulsion but education requires a strong element of volition. Anti-compulsion is essential to education, there is no one right way to do it or to grow up successfully either. That emperor has no clothes. One-right-way schooling has had a century and a half to prove itself; right from the beginning it was making excuses why it couldn't get the job done. That will never change.

Tax credits, vouchers, and even more sophisticated means are necessary to encourage a diverse mix of plans for different logics of growing up. The word "public" in our form of public education has not had a real meaning for a long time; public schooling will come back when we strip control from an Egyptian pyramid of expert classes and force our government to return full free market choice to the people. This is the only curriculum of necessity we need imposed on everyone.

John Taylor Gatto
New York City Teacher of the Year